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The Early Years of Company C 368th Engineer Battalion, U.S. Army Reserve In Rutland, Vermont

TED PENDLETON



Moving railway caboose from the railroad yard on Post Street to Sugar Maple Day Care Center on North Church Street on 5 August 1978.

About the Author

David Zsido was born in Proctor. He is a graduate of Mount Saint Joseph Academy and Norwich University. He was Secretary of the Rutland Historical Society in 1983 and in 1986 wrote a Quarterly entitled: "Antique Trucks: A Different Kind of Horsepower". He is a member of the Antique Truck Club of America and the American Truck Historical Society. He helped found the Green Mountain Bull Dawg Chapter of A.T.C.A. in 1992 and has served as the President of that chapter since. He is an avid collector of truck history and memorabilia, including antique trucks and equipment.

Zsido also served as an alderman on the Rutland City Board of Aldermen from 1981 to 1986. He is a Life Member of the Rutland County Agricultural Society and is a Past Post Commander of Rutland Post 31 of the American Legion. Zsido served with "Charlie Company" for approximately nine and one half years. He was the Commander of Company C for more than three years.

Preface

This brief recap of the early history of Company C during an approximately ten year period from 1971 to 1980 in no way captures all the training, exploits, dedication, and comradeship which took place during a relatively "peaceful" time in this nation's history. The war in Viet Nam was winding down during the early 1970's. Eleven years after 1980 the United States was committed to "Operation Desert Storm." The nation again called upon the members of Charlie Company to serve it 23 years after 1980. Mobilized to active duty for more than a year, they served overseas in Kuwait and Iraq. This history focuses on the years prior to 1980. The history of this unit after 1980 is left for another day.

Dedication

This publication is dedicated to all of the members of Company C 368th Engineer Battalion for the sacrifices which they have made for this great country while deployed overseas during the United States involvement with "Operation Enduring Freedom." These sacrifices separated them from their families, their friends, their jobs and their community and the things that we truly enjoy in life. We are, and shall always be, grateful and proud of their commitment to duty and the American spirit!

The Early Years of Company C 368th Engineer Battalion, U.S. Army Reserve In Rutland, Vermont

By David Zsido

On 14 February 2003 a group of four Premier Coach Line buses left the Courcelle Brothers United States Army Reserve Center on 16 North Street Extension in Rutland. The buses contained the men and women who were the unit members of Company C 368th Engineer Battalion (Combat Heavy). They were headed to Fort Drum, New York where they would undergo several weeks of intensive training to prepare them for overseas deployment as part of Operation: Enduring Freedom. At the time of their departure, it was not clear as to where their mission would bring them. Ultimately, it was learned that they would be sent to Kuwait as part of the vast support network for United States troops who were involved in the liberation of Iraq. While their mission would place the soldiers primarily in Kuwait at Camp Victory, where the soldiers of Company C utilized their military skills to begin the rehabilitation of highways, bridges, and other structures, a contingent of "Charlie Company" soldiers was also deployed into Iraq for a short period of time.

Both sides of North Main Street were lined with crowds from North Street Extension to the Rutland City Park. More friends, relatives, and neighbors were patiently waiting for the buses to pass the Rutland City Park along South Main Street. Local radio stations carried live broadcasts of their departure, as the groundswell of support for U.S. troops was vividly evident in Rutland. Ever so quickly the buses came into view, escorted by Rutland City Police Department cruisers. All too quickly they disappeared, responding to a call to duty that left an empty spot in the families and the communities which these soldiers left behind.

A few days earlier on 9 February 2003 the auditorium of the former Rutland High School on Library Avenue was packed well beyond capacity, as the City of Rutland paid tribute to the departing soldiers. Among the distinguished guests who offered their thoughts

and best wishes to the unit members was the recently sworn in Governor of Vermont, James Douglas.

Now that they have returned home and have been reunited with their families and communities, unquestionably the soldiers of Company C will have hundreds of stories to tell. Perhaps some of their experiences will be captured in print, so that future generations will recognize and remember the sacrifices they made by allowing their personal lives to be disrupted to answer the call to duty for this great nation.

Company C moved to Rutland during December of 1968. During the early 1960's its roots were in West Lebanon, New Hampshire. Then it relocated to White River Junction, Vermont, where it occupied two different reserve center locations prior to ultimately moving to Rutland. David Zsido was closely involved with the early portion of "Charlie Company's" history during the 1970's. He first became aware of "Charlie Company" during the fall of 1971. As part of his military obligation, he was assigned to the unit as a Second Lieutenant and the first general construction platoon leader. The Viet Nam Conflict was still underway, but the American involvement had begun to taper off. "Charlie Company" was nearly at full strength which at that time consisted of slightly more than 200 soldiers. Many of the unit members had volunteered for reserve duty rather than enlisting in the active components. The soldiers were highly skilled in their military occupational specialties (MOS's), as they came from civilian work backgrounds in related fields of carpentry, plumbing, electrical work, heavy equipment operation, and other general construction activities. The Community Civil Action program, adopted in 1968, allowed army reservists the opportunity to utilize their skills, along with the army equipment they would operate during times of mobilization, to provide a distinctive service to their communities by undertaking construction projects for various non-profit or municipal groups.

Many of the key non-commissioned officers (NCO's) had combat experience from World War II, the Korean Conflict, and the Viet Nam Conflict. Chief Warrant Officer (CWO-4) Richard Boyle of Windsor, who headed up Company C's maintenance platoon, was a veteran of World War II. Sergeant First Class (SFC) John J. Zuba of Hartland was a veteran of both World War II and the Korean Conflict. SFC Zuba was the construction supervisor. SFC Stanley Patnode of West Lebanon, New Hampshire, who was the mess steward, was also a veteran of World War II. His second in command, Darryl Gourley, who lived in Pomfret, Vermont, was a Viet Nam veteran. Darryl had been awarded the Combat Infantryman's Badge

for action he had seen in Viet Nam. SFC Bezar (Leonard) Eastman, who was the platoon sergeant for the horizontal construction unit, was a veteran of World War II.

The unit also had a handful of other enlisted personnel who had seen action during these previous wars. Many of these soldiers had joined Company C when it was formed in West Lebanon.

The mission of Company C during the 1970's was largely devoted to peacetime training. Many of the weekend drill activities were centered on community service projects. In fact, at least a few of the Annual Training Periods, 15 consecutive days of training that were commonly called "summer camps", were devoted to projects for non-profit or municipal organizations in the greater Rutland area. Prior to undertaking any such project, releases had to first be obtained from the Association of General Contractors (AGC) and the AFL-CIO. Several of these projects were located within the communities where the unit members actually lived. While many projects were right in the Rutland vicinity, at times projects were completed in areas further removed, such as Bennington, Hartland, and Plymouth.

By 1 July 1973, the military draft had ended and the armed forces of America converted to a volunteer basis. This required a greater emphasis on retention of existing members, and it also required a more dedicated effort to bring new enlistees or prior service individuals into the unit. With the end of the United States involvement in Viet Nam in 1975, the retention and recruiting effort became more a point of concern. The unit commander during the early 1970's was Captain Duncan U. Hunter of Springfield, Vermont. He remained the Commander until approximately 1974, when Captain Hugh Galvin of Bennington assumed the command. Galvin remained in charge until June of 1977, when David Zsido became the commander, a position he retained until the later part of 1980.

Charlie Company's annual training mission during the summer of 1972 was the "rehab" of ranges and facilities at Camp Edwards on Cape Cod. Camp Edwards was a small army presence at the then Otis Air Force Base. The "rehab" work consisted largely of constructing range shed facilities and latrines and utilizing heavy equipment to build range bermes and roadways. The soldiers of Charlie Company were housed in World War II era billets. The bachelor officers' quarters were in such a state of disrepair that they were affectionately called the "Roach Palace".

The local news on the Cape that summer, told of the mysterious disappearance of numerous 19th Century weather vanes from the roofs of old barns and buildings. It was generally surmised that a

helicopter had been utilized in the thefts. Fortunately Company C did not own a helicopter.

While returning home from the summer training, three vehicles within the convoy were involved in a motor vehicle accident. A privately owned vehicle (P.O.V.) pulled abruptly into the convoy during a heavy rainstorm at Buzzards Bay, and jammed on its brakes as the traffic light turned to red. This triggered a chain-reaction accident involving the three military vehicles. A quarter ton jeep was sandwiched between a three-quarter ton trailer to its front and a five-ton dump truck to its rear. One of the jeep's occupants had to be transported to a local hospital, where he remained for a few days. Ultimately he was discharged with a permanent back injury.

Once the unit returned to home station, it continued its "one weekend a month" training mission. The expansion of the Dewey Baseball Field in Center Rutland was one of Company C's community service projects during the remainder of 1972. Heavy equipment consisting of bulldozers, front-end loaders, and dump trucks was dispatched to that location during the months of September and October of that year.

During the May drill weekend in 1973, the unit convoyed to the Camp Ethan Allen firing range for its annual weapons qualifications



A D-7E caterpillar bulldozer leveling the expansion at Dewey Field in the fall of 1972.

with the M-16 rifle. The firing range is part of the Vermont Army National Guard facilities in Underhill, Vermont. Second Lieutenant Walter "Jack" Rejeski of Rutland, a 1966 graduate of Mount Saint Joseph Academy and a 1970 graduate of Norwich University, was the range officer for "Charlie Company" for this exercise.

The focus of training shifted during the Annual Training Period for the summer of 1973. The unit was assigned to perform community service work near its home station in Rutland. Arrangements were made to undertake some major horizontal and vertical construction projects at the Boy Scout Camp in Plymouth, Vermont. There was a wide variety of projects including construction of an overhead power line, internal wiring, small building construction, rehabilitation of existing buildings, installation of septic tanks, road construction, and the construction of a small target range. In fact, the work requirements were so plentiful that the unit returned for many drill weekends following the annual training to continue working on them.

While most of "Charlie Company" was fulfilling its 1973 annual training obligation at the Plymouth site, some members of the vertical construction platoons worked at the reserve center in



DAVID ZSIDO

A truck mounted compressor working on the backstop for the target range at Camp Plymouth Boy Scout Camp as part of annual training, July 1973. A bulldozer (1150 Case) is on the right.

Rutland. The drill hall had been transformed into a woodworking shop where these reservists were tasked with the complete fabrication of "map plazas" for the State of Vermont Highway Department. Hundreds of these structures were assembled and delivered to various points throughout the state of Vermont. The "map plazas" were a travel information structure from which tourists could identify and locate directions to regional lodging, restaurants, recreation areas, and points of interest. The concept may have been contrived to alleviate the travel information need which developed when the State of Vermont banned roadside billboards and advertising years earlier.



DAVID ZSIDO

A group of soldiers from the First General Construction Platoon installing a "map plaza" on U.S. Route 7, at Mill Village adjacent to Post Road.

During the middle years of the 1970's, Company C underwent annual training at Fort Drum, New York, not far from Watertown. The vertical construction platoons were typically engaged with general rehabilitation projects on the World War II vintage barracks and the old hospital. Much of this work consisted of re-wiring the electrical systems as well as installing new sheetrock walls and dropped ceilings. Other vertical construction platoon members, under the direction of SFC John Zuba, became involved with the

post's sewage treatment plant expansion. This was a rather extensive undertaking involving the erection of concrete forms, and then the pouring of countless yards of concrete.

During one of these mid-1970's 15-day annual training missions to Fort Drum, perhaps in April of 1976, a substantial snowfall occurred late one night. This happened, when the unit was tasked with tactical field missions. As the unit members slept, the snow kept piling up. Some lucky soldiers slept through the event, but others were abruptly awakened as their tents, heavily weighted with snow, collapsed onto them.

During that time period, when the 200 members of Company C were compensated for their 15 days of annual training, they were paid in cash. It was the responsibility of the unit's finance officer to assure that each soldier received his/her allocated pay. First Lieutenant David Zsido was assigned that additional duty during many of these annual training periods. Typically on the day before pay-call, he would have to report to the post finance office. There he would verify the cash payroll, which always consisted of newly printed currency. Once verified, the cash was placed back into the custody of post finance. On the following day, Zsido would return to post finance, accompanied by a guard. Both Zsido and the guard carried weapons, loaded with live ammunition, when they acquired the cash payroll. The two soldiers would then return to Charlie Company's headquarters and conduct pay-call.

Community service projects continued throughout this period of the 1970's as well. Some were rather small in scale, such as, dredging a fire pond adjacent to the Shrewsbury Elementary School in October of 1975. During the initial phases of that operation, there was some speculation that one of the unit's D-7E caterpillar bulldozers might remain permanently mired in the pond bed. Although the pond had been drained months earlier, when the bulldozer powered onto the "dry" siltation on the pond's floor, it almost immediately sunk over the top of both crawler tracks. However, it was ultimately determined that a hard gravel base was present about three feet below the silt. So the giant D-7E literally dug down and eventually was able to be powered back out of the pond bed once the job was completed.

Several weekend training missions were also spent at the Molly Stark School in Bennington, where the horizontal (earth-moving) platoon members used bulldozers, scrapers, and graders to carve athletic fields out of a large lot adjacent to the school.

Unfortunately, the unit had a mishap on an extremely cold Sunday morning in February of 1977. While on a typical training mission with a large rubber tired crane, Specialist Kenneth West

was in the process of departing from the reserve center. As he pulled onto North Street Extension no one noticed that the crane's boom was not fully cradled into its rest. The boom was raised several inches above its normal stowed position. As the equipment approached the street line, the tip of the boom pushed into a sizeable telephone cable. This impact caused at least two utility poles along the south line of North Street Extension to snap off. Utility lines came crashing to the ground. This resulted in a widespread interruption of electrical service throughout the northeast region of the City of Rutland for several hours. It also drew the ire of Alderman Peter Louras, who lived nearby.

During the late summer and fall of 1977, that same crane was called upon to render assistance to the Vermont State Police. Apparently, there had been a rash of automobile thefts in the greater Rutland area. Ultimately, it was discovered that many of these stolen vehicles had been driven into nearby flooded marble quarries in West Rutland and Leicester. A handful of unit members worked in conjunction with the Vermont State Police divers, who hitched the crane's "big hook" onto several submerged vehicles, which were then raised to dry ground.



DAVID ZSIDO

Mobile crane assists Vermont State Police in retrieval of stolen cars from the Leicester Quarry in October 1977.

As winter was beginning to approach during a cold November drill weekend in 1977, soldiers from the earth-moving platoon journeyed to West Rutland, where they pushed out a parking lot expansion for the West Rutland High School.

In early February of 1978, the northeast region of the United States was crippled by the "Blizzard of 1978". The coastal regions of New England were paralyzed by this disastrous snowstorm, which dropped as much as three feet of snow in certain areas. Vehicles by the thousands were abandoned on major East Coast Interstate Highways, as well as, on city streets of large southern New England cities. A request came for volunteers from "Charlie Company" to assist with the recovery efforts in Providence, Rhode Island. Some eight soldiers were airlifted from the Rutland Airport in a Huey helicopter. They spent several days, working on a twelve-hour night shift, running D-7E caterpillar bulldozers to open up the city streets of Providence. The overall recovery effort was a massive undertaking, which involved military components from the active duty forces; the reserves; and the National Guard. For their commitment to the recovery efforts, dubbed "Snow-Blow '78", the eight members of "Charlie Company" received the Humanitarian Service Medal from the Department of the Army.

On the return airlift to Rutland from Providence, the Huey helicopter encountered a strong headwind. The "chopper" drifted from its intended flight path south of Keene, New Hampshire. Captain David Zsido, who was part of the recovery team, noticed that the co-pilot had a map on his lap and seemed to be "scratching his head". The crew chief advised Zsido, that they were slightly off course, and asked if Zsido knew where they were. Since he had a general idea of their location, Zsido was equipped with a "hot microphone" and guided the chopper back to Rutland.

The year 1978 continued to be an extremely busy year for the unit. Several unit members volunteered extra time, in a non-paid status, to help complete several of the community service missions. One of these volunteer efforts involved the expansion of the parking lot at the tiny Ira Volunteer Fire Department during the month of May. The expansion required that more than 500 yards of material be hauled some two miles from a nearby gravel pit to the fire station on Route 133. The task required a D-7E bulldozer to loosen the highly compacted gravel of the hard glacial till. Then a 2.5-yard Hough frontend loader began loading the handful of five-ton dump trucks which would deliver the material to the parking lot site. A smaller Case 1150 bulldozer took care of spreading the material, once it was delivered to the parking lot site.

Later during the July drill weekend in 1978, and perhaps for a couple of months thereafter, the unit was requested to assist the City of Rutland with the removal of the demolition material from the old Rutland swimming pool on North Main Street. This was a rather cumbersome task as re-enforcement bars (rebars) in the old concrete had to be removed from the shattered pieces of concrete and brick. Then the old chunks of the swimming pool were loaded onto five-ton dump trucks and hauled to the opposite end of town at White's Playground, where the debris was used as fill.

During July, other unit members from the Combat Heavy Engineer Company were tasked to help the Sugar Maple Day Care Center move a railroad caboose. Again the unit's crane was called back into service. In addition, one ten-ton truck tractor with low bed trailer was also required. The caboose was located in the railroad yard on the south side of the River Street Bridge in Rutland. It had to be lifted from the railroad tracks; have its trucks (wheels) removed; and then be placed onto the low bed trailer. The lift was accomplished in conjunction with a second crane provided by the Giancola Construction Company.

Once loaded and chained down, the oversize load headed out of the railroad yard and made its way across the River Street Bridge. It progressed eastward along Madison Street to South Main Street. Periodically, low hanging telephone service cables had to be raised so that the tall load would clear. The small procession proceeded north on South Main Street, and then continued north on North Main Street; turned westerly on Field Street; and then northerly on North Church Street to its destination.

The unit continued its 1978 training year by once again returning to Fort Drum, New York for Annual Training in August. Its mission consisted of the construction of firing range target sheds, and the rehabilitation of the Readsville Road, a tank trail. In October of 1978 the unit assisted the Mendon Fish & Game Club in Pittsford with a parking lot expansion project, firing range expansion, and other clubhouse renovations.

As the new year rolled around in 1979, the reservists from the general construction platoons were actively involved with providing carpentry assistance to the Clarendon Volunteer Fire Department at a couple of their small rural stations. In February, members of the earth-moving platoon, accompanied by their huge Caterpillar D-7F bulldozer, were called upon by the Town of Chittenden to open up some secondary roads, which had been closed with snow drifts of over ten feet.



A huge caterpillar D-7F bulldozer assists the Town of Chittenden in removing snowdrifts that reached over ten feet deep in February 1979.

For "Charlie Company's" annual training during that year, it once again returned to Camp Edwards on Cape Cod, following a five year absence. Some of the projects included: building a concrete heli-pad at the airport facility; reconstructing Gibb Road; as well as building firing range sheds and facilities.

Upon their return, the soldiers from "Charlie Company" undertook a large project at Northwood Recreational Park off Park Lane in Rutland Town. This effort called for the creation of outdoor basketball and tennis courts as well as softball fields. Some members of the vertical construction platoons, armed with chain saws from their pioneer tool trailers, marched on a wooded tract of land along Tenney Brook north of what was then Kehoe's Market on Grove Street in Rutland. The area had developed a bad reputation as a hang-out for teen-age smoking; drinking; and possible drug use. It had been called by a couple of different names: "Monkeyland" and "Jungleland". The reservists were requested to cut all the trees and underbrush to open the area for better visibility.

The cadre of officers during this era of Company C included four graduates of Norwich University: Captain David Zsido – Unit Commander; 1st Lieutenant Robert Giddings – Executive Officer; 1st

Lieutenant Stanley Burzyki – horizontal platoon leader; and 2nd Lieutenant James Kennison – first general construction platoon leader. Moreover, the unit had its own public affairs NCO, Specialist Robert “Hunka” Marro. Although this was an unofficial position, it provided a very useful service.

The year 1980 would be Captain Zsido’s last year with Company C of the 368th Engineer Battalion. It was another year filled with community service work as well as the usual military training which was always required. The unit underwent M-16 weapons qualifications at the Camp Ethan Allen firing range in Underhill during the month of April. As was typical over the years, Charlie Company was represented in the annual Loyalty Day Parade in Rutland. Annual Training would once again be conducted at Camp Edwards at the former Otis Air Force Base in Massachusetts. There, roadwork projects consisted of improving Orchard Drive. The general construction platoons were kept busy with numerous firing range improvement projects.

During the remainder of the summer and fall months of that year, Charlie Company returned to Northwood Park in Rutland Town to continue its mission there. It also initiated another athletic field project, this time in the Town of Proctor, where a little league



Bulldozers and five-ton dump trucks assemble to begin work on the Proctor Little League Baseball field adjacent to Gorham Bridge Road in June of 1980.

baseball field expansion was undertaken adjacent to Gorham Bridge Road in that community.

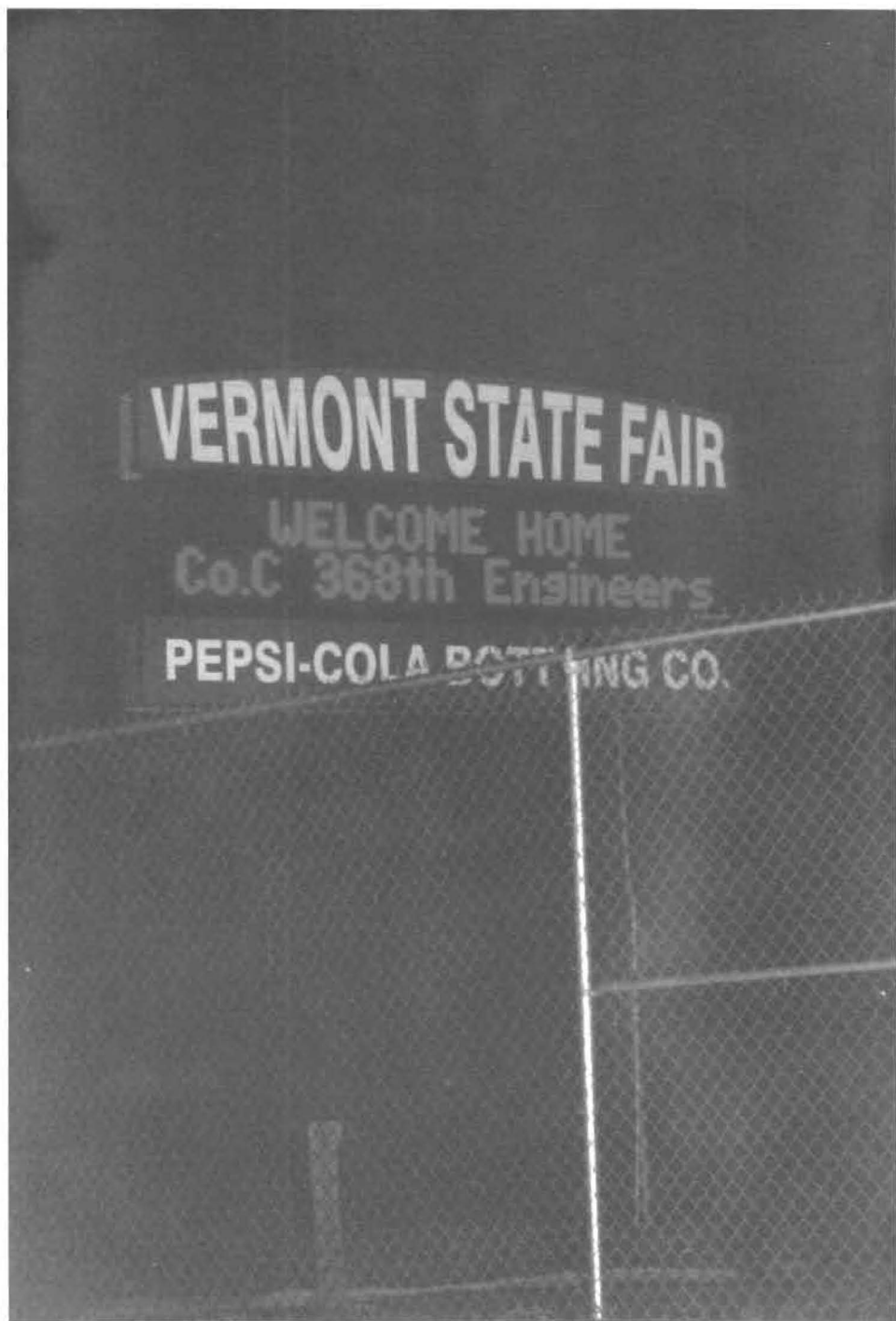
On a cold November 11th, of 1980, equipment from the earth-moving platoon participated in the annual Rutland Veteran's Day Parade.

As its mission became more critical to the National Defense Strategy during the next two decades of the 1980's and the 1990's, "Charlie Company" underwent a vast shift in its annual training requirements. Quite often during this twenty-year period the unit would find its soldiers training on foreign soil, or at locations in the United States, which were a considerable distance from Rutland. They were involved with road building in Honduras in 1988; vigorous tactical training at Gagetown (a Canadian Forces Base) in New Brunswick in 1992; general construction projects during annual training 1994 again in Honduras along with maintenance projects in Guatemala; fence and road construction along the California-Mexico border in 1994; construction of an infantry squad battle course in Kenya in 1996; and returning to Gagetown, Canada, in 1997.

During this twenty-year period, when annual training was conducted closer to home, the unit returned to places like Fort Drum, New York and Fort Devens, Massachusetts. During one home station annual training period in 1991, the unit was deployed to the Vermont State Airport at Rutland, where they engineered a 4,000-foot runway, and completed a headquarters building for the Vermont Civil Air Patrol. Moreover many community service projects were brought to completion, such as the Proctor Little League field and the Northwood Park expansion in Rutland Town during the monthly drill weekend schedules. Numerous other new projects were also undertaken.

Finally, after years of commitment to its training and service mission to the local communities through community service programs and to other nations of the world through peace-time annual training missions on foreign soil, "Charlie Company" – Company C 368th Engineer Battalion was called to active duty to serve America during a time of conflict, which was undertaken to liberate the people of Iraq and free the world of terrorism. With their mission completed, these army reservists returned home to Rutland on 15 March 2004, as crowds of people waving United States flags greeted them.

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In March 2004 a sign at the Vermont State Fairgrounds welcomes Company C of the 368th Engineer Battalion, U.S. Army Reserve, home from their tour of duty in Kuwait.